

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

May 28, 2014

Mr. Gene L. Dodaro  
Comptroller General of the United States  
U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO)  
441 G Street, NW - Room 7100  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Dodaro:

We write to respectfully request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) undertake a review of the American public's access to emergency health care facilities with on-site medical personnel trained in conducting sexual assault forensic examinations.

Revelations regarding the prevalence of sexual assaults in the military have catalyzed a committed bipartisan effort to ensure the safety of our servicemembers and to bring sexual predators to justice. In reviewing the many challenges faced by assault victims in the armed forces, we were particularly compelled by a GAO report which found that the availability of health care resources to servicemen and women who have been sexually assaulted varies depending on the branch of military service and the operational uncertainties of certain deployed environments (GAO-13-182). We believe these variations result in a patchwork of policies that impede department-level prevention efforts and reduce the reliability of forensic evidence. Acknowledging that such evidence is vital in bringing assailants to justice, the Senate Armed Services Committee included language in the FY14 National Defense Authorization Act that urges the Department of Defense to ensure military health care providers charged with managing the acute and long-term needs of sexual assault victims are widely available and adequately trained.

We are proud to work with our Senate colleagues to develop solutions to the scourge of sexual assaults in the armed forces, but we know that challenges to pursuing and achieving justice for victims of sexual assault in the U.S. also exist outside the military. We have heard from constituents in our home states of Colorado, New Hampshire and North Carolina, as well as advocacy groups from across the country, that there is a nation-wide shortage of medical personnel trained in conducting sexual assault forensic examinations for the purpose of collecting evidence and providing appropriate counseling. Specifically, it has been suggested that the ability of an emergency room to collect and preserve medical forensic evidence in cases of sexual assault and domestic violence varies significantly from hospital to hospital and may be especially limited at health care facilities in rural areas and communities most at risk of sexual assault and domestic violence. This deficiency must be remedied; justice for victims of sexual assault should not be impeded due to a lack of access to properly trained medical personnel.

As you know, the federal government can play a vital role in addressing this issue through grant funding available as a result of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). Therefore, as part of a greater effort to ensure that the disparities in access to the capabilities described above do not disproportionately affect already vulnerable populations, we request that GAO answer the following questions:

- (1) To what extent are states using VAWA funding to train sexual assault nurse examiners or to train examiners in collecting and preserving evidence, recognizing victims' emotional and physical needs and providing counseling on available support services?
- (2) What are states' assessments of the extent to which this funding meets their needs for such examiners?
- (3) What else is known about the extent to which hospitals have such trained examiners in place, the availability of bilingual examiners in areas where they may be necessary and any challenges posed by gaps in coverage?

If we can answer any questions or clarify this request further, please feel free to contact Leslie Hylton with Senator Mark Udall at 202-224-6134 or Dan Auger with Senator Ayotte at 202-224-3324.

Sincerely,

 

Mark Udall  
U.S. Senator

Kelly Ayotte  
U.S. Senator



Kay Hagan  
U.S. Senator  
Chair, Subcommittee on Children and Families  
Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions